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India's Nuclear Capability Increasing

India, which exploded a nuclear bomb 11 years ago, can set off a second one within two months of a decision to do so, and is already storing enough material to build an entire nuclear arsenal.

In addition, the Indians appear to be mastering the more sophisticated technique of building a hydrogen bomb.

This is the latest information we've gathered from CIA sources and a recent trip to India. It adds fresh cause for concern to our recent report that Pakistan could also produce a nuclear bomb within a matter of weeks. Our sources say there's no question that India is far ahead of its neighbor and potential adversary.

India's 1974 device, which had about the power of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, was essentially a plutonium-fission device. Since then, the CIA has received reports—still highly classified—that India was about to detonate another bomb.

In early 1976, for example, President Gerald Ford was alerted to a report by a "reliable clandestine source" that India would complete its second nuclear bomb within three or four weeks, and would test it underground. But the test was never made.

Although his late mother, Indira, pushed the nuclear program when she governed India, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi was thought unlikely to follow her lead in this area.

But he changed his mind earlier this year when he became alarmed at the progress Pakistan was making in nuclear weapons development. On May

4, he stated publicly that Pakistan's "persistent efforts" to join the nuclear club had compelled India to review its nuclear policy.

So far, however, the CIA has had difficulty learning many details of the Indian nuclear program. "Indian security is extremely tight on any aspect of its program relating to nuclear explosives," lamented one top-secret CIA report we've seen. To make matters worse, good satellite photography of India's possible A-test areas has been hampered by poor weather, the report adds.

According to CIA sources, India is going ahead with work on a hydrogen bomb. Unlike the crude atomic bomb it detonated in 1974, a hydrogen bomb is a fusion device triggered by an A-bomb, and thus far more complex to develop.

The H-bomb is being built at the Bhabha nuclear research center near Bombay. About three dozen scientists there are trying to refine a process called "inertial confinement fusion."

The CIA acknowledges that this process can be used for peaceful purposes, but the expense and concentration of scientists on this project suggest that if it is not already a weapons program it could easily and quickly be converted into one.

Meanwhile, at a reprocessing plant less than a mile from its U.S.-built Tarapur atomic power plant, India since 1983 has been stockpiling separated plutonium that is ideal for weapons. At full capacity, the plant can reprocess 100 tons of spent fuel a year, separating out as much as 150 kilograms of weapons-grade plutonium. Six to eight kilos are enough for a nuclear bomb.